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OLD COURT HOUSE AND PROVINCIAL HALL, PHILADELPHIA. FROM A PAINTING IN THE PHILADELPHIA LIBRARY

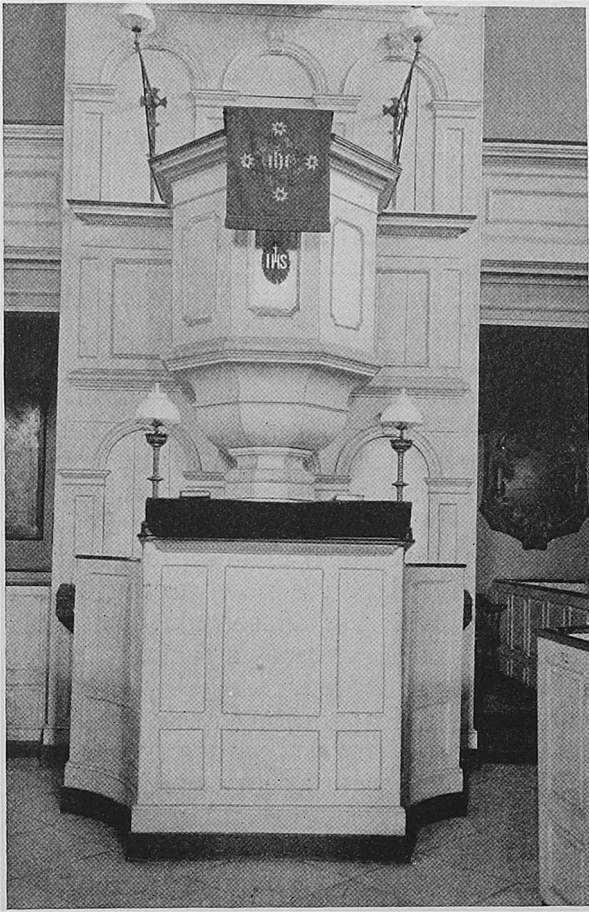
## The Amateur Architects of Colonial America

BY CHARLES HENRY CARR

**T**O the amateur architects of Colonial America posterity must ever be grateful for the goodly heritage they left behind them. They were not dilettanti who dabbled in architectural pursuits as an agreeable pastime, when they had nothing else to do. They were men of affairs and of strongly constructive genius, not a few of them occupied with weighty matters of greatest public import, — Washington Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Hamilton, and many others whose names are written indelibly on the pages of History.

These men realized that architecture is an appropriate and inevitable reflection, in tangible form, of the spirit and ideals of the age in which it is created. They knew that architecture is a faithful index

and necessary expression of the state of culture and human progress that produces it. Quite apart from gratifying their personal tastes and inclinations, the exercise of their architectural prowess was a patriotic duty, for there were few professional architects in the Colonies and master-carpenters were the only others who possessed any technical qualifications. The task of designing, therefore, was perforce thrust upon the amateur architects as a part of their responsibility in the upbuilding of a new land. To their efforts in this direction we owe some of our finest Eighteenth century churches and public buildings, as well as many of the finest houses of that period, which remain a living inspiration today. Their services in the work of nation building we shall better understand if we take especial



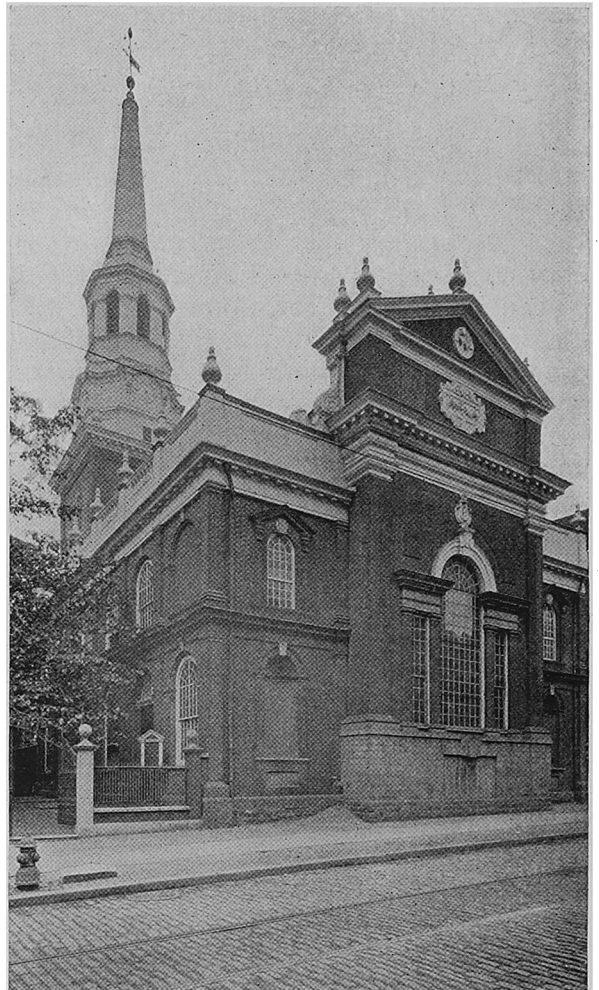
THE PULPIT AND CLERK'S ROOM, ST. PETER'S CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA

note of a few of the most representative men and their achievements.

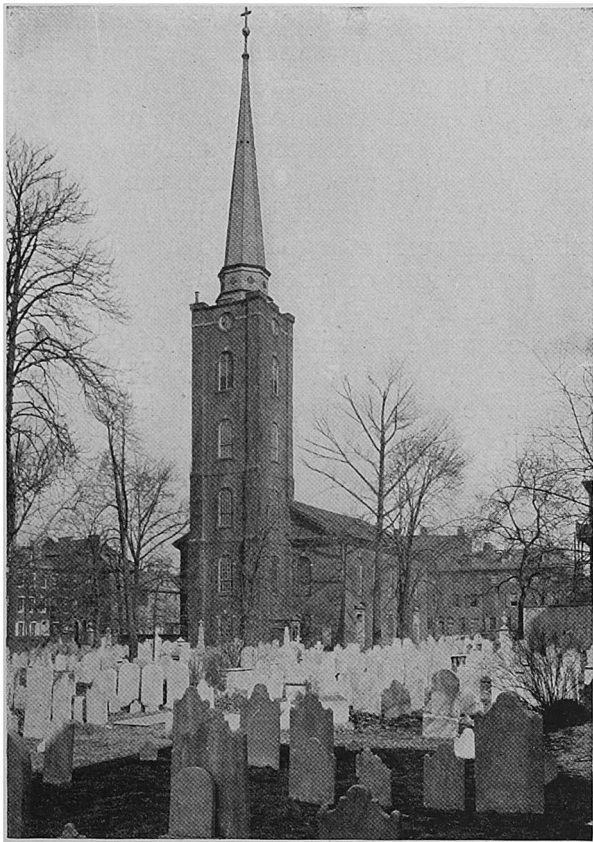
In 1708, when a structure more substantial than the previous sheds was needed for the market-house in Philadelphia, a structure that might, agreeably to old English custom also serve as Town Hall, Court House and State House, an order was issued providing that "Alderman Masters and Joshua Carpenter are appointed to lay out ground and contrive this building." This they forthwith did, and by 1710 the building was under roof. As the illustration shows, although each line was instinct with straightforward practicality, it also possessed an architectural charm and dignity comporting with the conspicuous part it was destined to play in history and reflecting credit upon the judgment of its "contrivers." A few years before this, in 1695, Samuel

Carpenter, one of the foremost colonists of Pennsylvania, a member of the Provincial Council, and the trusted friend of William Penn, had built for himself in Philadelphia what is always known as the Slate Roof House. Of this the ground floor plans, attributed to his hand, are still preserved among the Logan Papers in the collection of the Pennsylvania Historical Society.

One of the striking figures of Colonial history is that of Andrew Hamilton, sometime Attorney-General of the Province of Pennsylvania, Provincial Councillor, Speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly for a number of successive years, Governor of the Province and, above all, eminent pleader and jurist, whose famous defence of the New York printer, Peter



ST. PETER'S CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA. DESIGNED BY DR. JOHN KEARSLEY



CHRIST CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA, DESIGNED BY DR. JOHN KEARSLEY

Zenger, in 1735, won him such lasting reputethroughout the Colonies and in England, as a defender of the freedom of the press, that Gouverneur Morris afterward styled him "the day-star of the American Revolution." A man of exceptional and varied attainments and blessed with remarkable elegance of taste, amid all the distractions of a busy legal and public career, and the demands incident to the management of his own large estate, he nevertheless found time for architectural study and the State House in Philadelphia is an enduring monument to his talents in that direction.

The story of the plan for the State House sheds an interesting light upon conditions in the Colonies at that time. The Provincial Assembly having determined to build the State House, in 1729 appointed a committee of three to procure suitable plans. Two members of this committee themselves prepared plans, Judge Hamilton and Dr. John Kearsley.

Dr. Kearsley was a busy physician with an extensive practice; over and above his professional duties he was much occupied with important civic and Provincial activities and for a long period sat in the Provincial Assembly. He found a certain amount of time, however, for architectural pursuits and had just achieved a well deserved reputation as an architect by his designs for Christ Church, a structure of which any architect might justly feel proud. Hamilton's architectural aptitude was unknown and it was commonly supposed that his attention had been wholly engrossed by legal and public business. But while in London, receiving his legal training in the Inns of Court, he had mastered considerable architectural knowledge. He now presented his design which the Assembly, notwithstanding Dr. Kearsley's acknowledged reputation, accepted.

Marked ability among amateur architects was not restricted to any one part of the Colonies nor to any special period. John Smibert, whose fame is always associated with early New England portraiture, also essayed architectural activities and designed Faneuil Hall in Boston, an achievement that set the seal upon his skill. Joseph Brown of Providence, a wealthy man of business, was deeply interested in scientific pursuits, had a comprehensive knowledge of electricity, was proficient in mechanics and astronomy and held a professorship in Brown University, being also a trustee thereof. The First Baptist Church in Providence, built in 1775, attests his architectural ability. John Greene, a contemporary Providence worthy, left three fine churches in that city as witnesses to his aptitude as an architect. Captain Isaac Damon, of Northampton, and not a few more might be added to this list of amateur architects less celebrated than some of the others, perhaps, but not less deserving of recognition.

Samuel Rhoads, sometime Mayor of Philadelphia, and merchant, the designer of the Pennsylvania Hospital, was trained as a carpenter in accordance with the





THE PENNSYLVANIA HOSPITAL, PHILADELPHIA, DESIGNED BY SAMUEL RHODS

Quaker theory that every boy should be brought up to a trade no matter what calling he might intend to pursue afterward. His many public activities and the broad diversity of his business interests, however, entitle him to be reckoned among amateur architects rather than among the carpenter-architects or master-carpenters of the period. A member of the Provincial Assembly and one of the Pennsylvania delegates to the First Continental Congress, he was a man whose opinion was always sought in every matter of importance. It is quite natural, therefore, that we should find him serving on the first board of managers of the Pennsylvania Hospital. Ground being secured, "a complete plan of the buildings was directed to be so prepared that a part could be occupied the ensuing season (1755). Samuel Rhoads, one of the managers, was very zealous in the work and, after consulting the physicians in regard to the situation of the cells and

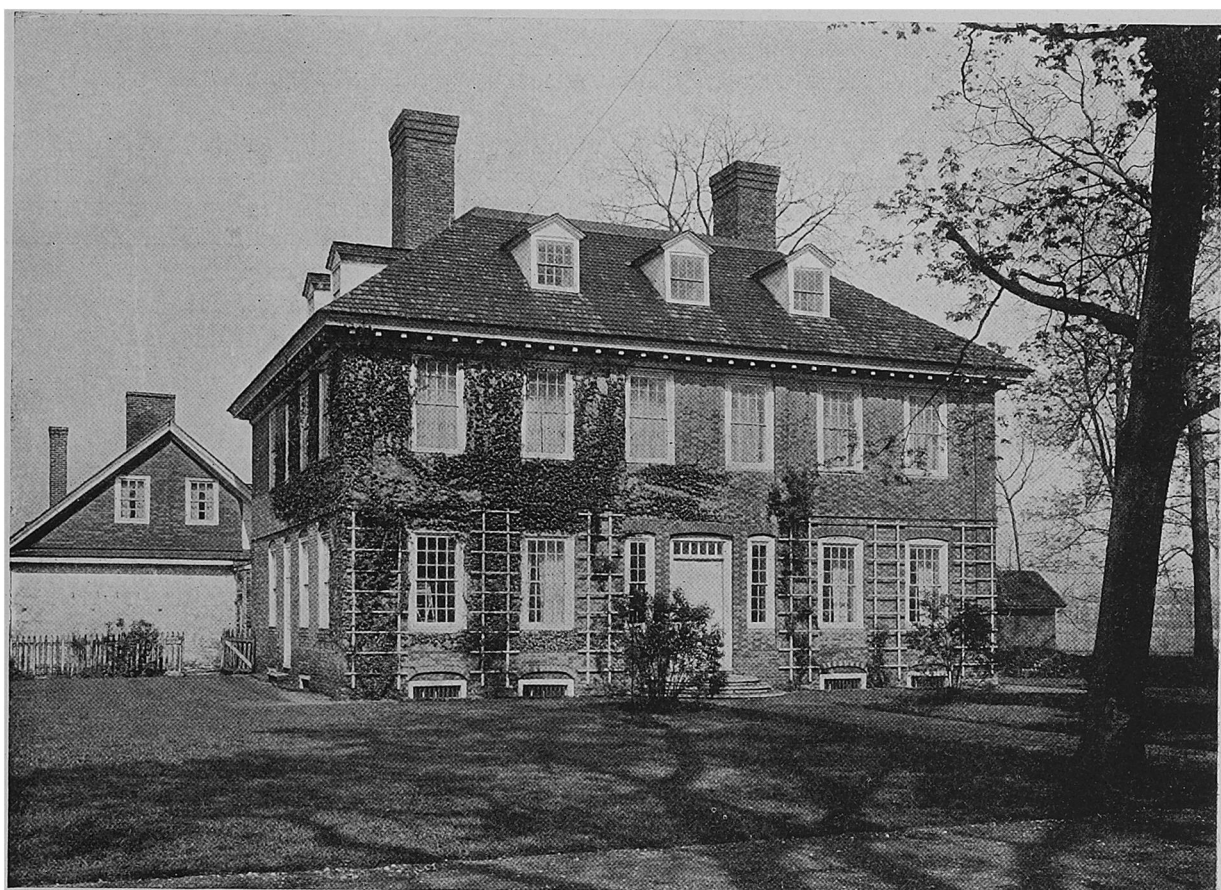
other conveniences, he presented a design of the whole building, in such form that one third might first alone be erected with tolerable symmetry." His plan was adopted, "after due consideration," and not many years afterward the whole design became an accomplished fact, the hospital being one of the most impressive structures erected during the Georgian era.

Dr. William Thornton, another intensely active Eighteenth century physician who found opportunity in the midst of engrossing professional activities to acquit himself creditably in the field of architectural endeavor, as well as to discharge his full share of the public duties imposed upon him by his fellow citizens, was the first designer of the Capitol at Washington and had much to do with superintending its erection. During a considerable residence in Philadelphia he had designed the old Philadelphia Library and had also exerted a perceptible

influence in the design of many houses.

The two most illustrious of our amateur architects were George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Washington, as we know, was responsible for Mount Vernon in its present form along with all the buildings on the estate. He not only drew all the designs and plans with his customary punctilious exactitude, and made out all the specifications, but, in so far as circumstances permitted, actually superintended the work. Pohick Church, of which parish he was a member and vestryman, was designed by Washington who made the elevations and floor plans and personally superintended the work of construction. One of these drawings, an elevation and plan, is still extant and is executed in small scale on a piece of paper 10 by 15 inches in size. How much he had to do with the design of Christ Church, Alexandria, is an open question. Thomas Jefferson not only designed

and superintended the erection of his own home, Monticello, but also designed the buildings of the University of Virginia and supervised their erection with the most conscientious solicitude. Jefferson's original drawings are still preserved, many of them "on scraps of paper of all sizes and kinds, partly in pencil, partly in ink; at a very small scale," but done with considerable skill. The reverse sides of the sheets often contain notes relative to the materials, estimates of quantities, or architectural details. Jefferson, besides executing plans and making estimates for every important feature, also trained brick moulders, "had brick made on the campus, taught masons and carpenters their trades, designed tools and implements for all his men, and established in his own yard a forge where all nails, bolts and ironwork used were turned out under his direction by his own household slaves."



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